Stuck Throttle in Paradise

By Lt. Sam Messer

My second COMPTUEX was just as busy as my first one, and I rapidly approached 50 hours for the month. We almost had defeated the simulated forces of evil, and, tonight, I would pad those hours while getting good training in the mighty "War Hoover."

Before walking on my double-cycle, night, surface-warfare flight, I did a routine check of the ADB. One of the gripes concerned mismatched throttles, but the engine still had good indications across the board. I had seen a few throttle-rig gripes on previous flights, even one that had a tailpipe fire on shutdown. I figured it just was more of the same issues, and, since the gripe had been signed off, I had no problems taking the jet.

Photo by Matthew J. Thomas. Modified

The on-deck routine went flawlessly, and I was spotted on cat 4 with time to spare. When we got the tension signal, I ran both throttles to military while doing my wipeout. I noticed the No. 1 throttle didn't quite match the No. 2 throttle's position on the quadrant, and the engine was slow to spool up. The COTAC and I called out the lag, but the engines were performing fine, and we elected to launch. Seconds later, we were traveling down the stroke and into the moonless Caribbean sky.

The next few hours flew by; we were busy locating and sorting out surface contacts. Finally, we got a call to take out one of the simulated hostiles. While a couple of Hornets set up for guided bomb unit runs, we maneuvered for a Harpoon shot. We took the shot, secured the radar, and sharply turned away from the target at MRT.

Once clear, I brought back the throttles, but something I'd never seen before happened. The No. 1 engine indications were pegged at their max settings, as if I was at full throttle, but both throttles were in the idle position. I could control the No. 2 engine, but the other throttle felt completely loose, and throttle movement had no affect on the engine.

I put the needle on the nose and headed toward the ship. My COTAC began checking us through the frequencies and contacted our representative. Our TACCO got out the book and vainly looked for an EP that covered stuck throttles.

The No. 1 engine was running fine, although at the max-power setting. I figured the slowest I could get was 250 knots, even with No. 2 at idle. When our rep finally came on the radio, I told him of the situation. We also told him that to slow enough for dirty-up, we would have to shut down the engine.

The inevitability of flying a single-engine approach to the boat, on a night with zero illumination, with a cloud deck, began to sink in. Our rep asked us for a recommendation. The El Conquistador and all its appealing amenities was only a short divert away, but I snapped out of it and asked to be recovered aboard ship. The rep said to bring it aboard to and expect the first ramp time.

We were established in holding overhead, like any good Viking would be, and went through the precautionary engine-shutdown checklist. While the TACCO read the steps, the COTAC and I flew, talked on the radios, and completed the steps. The auxiliary-power unit started with no problems, so we didn't have to use emergency methods to get dirty. When we reached the step for pulling off the throttle, I pulled it around the detent, but the engine continued running at high speed.

I told the crew I was pulling the fire-pull handle—a procedure not in the PCL. It was the only way to shut down the engine. I've heard people say it takes a little while for the engine to shut down using this method, and NATOPS says securing the throttle is the fastest method. The engine seemed to shut down quickly.

With the engine secured, we finished the rest of the checklists and prepared for the approach. We had dumped fuel, and, after checking the waveoff performance and referencing our dirty bingo numbers, we dumped a little more to improve our climb rate. After we finished a quick review of the single-engine-waveoff procedures, approach called us down. I chanted a quick mantra to myself that the approach would be like the simulator. With some excellent backup from my rightseater and sugar calls from paddles, we soon were aboard and enjoying a one-eyed jack in the wardroom.

The maintainers found the pull cable that attaches the throttle to the throttle linkage in the engine pylon had disconnected. A cotter key that should have been safety-wired had come out and had allowed the attaching screw to slowly work its way out. I had, right in front of me, several indications that pointed to an impending failure, and it was a matter of time before that system would fail.

Fate chose my crew to be in the aircraft when it failed, but we prevailed, using a combination of measures. The coordination between my crew and boat personnel helped us make timely and correct decisions. I had practiced multiple emergencies and had gone over many scenarios, but I never had considered a stuck throttle. When something unusual occurs, you always can fall back on CRM, solid headwork, and good airmanship.

Lt. Messer flies with VS-24.